

## Chapter 248 - Terrace Meeting

Somewhat reassured by Valela's own awkwardness, Kai took a seat.

*That went okay, I think...*

Two porcelain plates and an array of cutlery lay over a green satin tablecloth covered by delicate white lace. There was no menu or food, just a crystal bottle with flavored water, a vase of red peonies and a golden bell. Judging by the sympathetic link engraved on the metal, the chime must be used to call a waiter through magic rather than sound.

*Rich people are so weird, though I can probably afford these kinds of places now. Wait... am I wealthier than her?*

Enchantments covered every item and piece of marble, some even intertwined with the blooming wisteria. They were far from the most elaborate arrays Kai had witnessed, but they were woven with elegance and precision. Their relative simplicity also meant he could understand how they worked if he applied his skills.

*I should visit fancy restaurants more often. They didn't even bother to cloak the runes.*

His fingers itched to take out a notebook and jot down his ideas. There were so many possible applications, he could—

"Is everything alright? I know it's quite the sight." Valela motioned to the gilded hills sloping down onto the Ring Road and the port beyond. "Feel free to order anything you want. It's on my tab."

"Uhm, thanks." Kai poured himself a glass of icy water to keep his hands busy. He appreciated the coldness flowing down his parched throat, though he could do without the sweet flowery taste. "I'm good for now."

*Focus. Now's not the time to get distracted.*

The princess peered at him with a polite smile, clad in an armor of poise and manners. "We can talk freely. The balcony is warded against eavesdropping and spying. You were saying you needed a new ID?"

"Yes." Kai nodded. "The Republic thinks I'm dead and I'd rather keep it that way. They would never leave me alone otherwise."

Valela sipped the purplish water, tapping her nails on the crystal glass with a thoughtful furrow. "A soul contract isn't secure enough to safeguard this kind of information. They would probably extract any knowledge you have, then scrub your memories or imprison you to prevent enemy forces from learning about the realm."

*What the fuck? That's worse than I thought...*

"I'd like to avoid that." Kai maintained a facade of calmness through the disturbing news. Thank the spirits he had put his glass down. "Can you help me create a new identity?"

*Damn. Was that too direct?*

Nervousness twisted his stomach again.

"I... yes." The princess bit her lip. "Do you mind if I ask you what happened to the hidden realm? Even the Space warpers General Seryne brought couldn't find a way inside. I don't need every detail, but I must know if more mana anomalies will endanger the archipelago."

*She did always put duty first... that's more than a fair trade.*

"There won't be any more yellow beast attacks if that's your worry," Kai stated. "I took care of that." Even if Zervathi were willing to reopen the Sanctuary, the god was bound by the first bargain to not harm humans for a hundred years.

"I see." Valela easily accepted his answer. "And do you know if or when the realm will become accessible again?"

*Hmm... She must have a way of gauging my truthfulness...*

That was a dangerous topic. Kai held her clear gaze to look for any whisper of warning. His heart skipped a beat when faint mutters tickled his mind - they didn't hum of danger but prompted him to proceed.

*All those levels and milestones weren't for nothing after all.*

The rare times Hallowed Intuition offered a suggestion without a looming threat on his life, he had never regretted following it. The skill only bothered to speak when a choice would significantly impact his life.

"It depends on what the god of the Hidden Sanctuary, Zervathi, decides." Kai casually dropped the name of the divinity. "He'll wait till he has recovered enough power to connect with the outside. I don't know if that will take a few years, a hundred or more."

Valela nodded, pensive but not particularly surprised. "It was actually a forgotten divinity... Thank you for telling me. This information will be *extremely* useful for the future of our islands."

"Just glad I could help." Kai played it off. He was relieved to have shared his knowledge with someone who cared about the archipelago enough to act on it.

“Do you mind if I order something?” Valela picked up the enchanted bell. “We can discuss your situation with a few refreshments.”

*Does that mean she'll help me?*

“Sure. Go ahead.”

Before the chime of the bell completely settled, a waiter entered through the glass door, as if he were waiting outside to be summoned. “How may I assist you?”

“Hmm... I'd like a Candid Meadow, two Rose Buds...” Valela quickly mentioned half a dozen dishes that made no sense to Kai.

*Do overcomplicated names and wealth come in a single package?*

The waiter faintly nodded without taking any notes. “Your orders will be delivered in seven minutes. As you know, our chef prepares everything on demand of our clients to maintain freshness. I'll be at your disposal for any other services.”

“Thank you, that's everything.”

“With your permission.” The waiter bowed out.

*That's still weird.*

Alone on the terrace, Valela turned her attentions to him again. “It must have been quite hard to spend two years in that place. I heard hidden dimensions are often dangerous. Do you need anything else besides an ID? Like money? Or a place to stay?”

“I'm quite alright, but thank you for offering and for keeping an eye out for my family.”

“That's nothing.” She quickly dismissed. “The military would have locked down the archipelago if you hadn't broken into my room to warn me that night. You gave us an even stronger position when the hidden realm was sealed.” Valela fiddled with a lock of hair. “Sorry, I'm rambling. We should resolve your situation. Most of the islands have already been surveyed, but it shouldn't be a—”

She froze right as Kai sensed a skill brushing his aura. Her eyes widened, more shocked than when he had mentioned a god. “You've reached Yellow.”

*Hey, it's rude to check other people without permission. I mean, I also do it if they won't notice. But still.*

“Yeah, and you have advanced too.” Kai reciprocated the sweep.

“But how—” She stuttered, ignoring his reply. “You're just fourteen.”

“I’m closer to fifteen, thank you very much. And you’re not much older.”

“I advanced a month ago. I—” Valela leaned on the table, fingers through her hair. “Spirits, this complicates things...”

“What do you mean?”

“I checked your grade for your ID. The Republic records your race advancement if you’re of age.”

“And that means...?”

“There are few people at Yellow in the archipelago, and *none* at your age. A youngster can fall through the system, but with your grade, the clerks will run background checks.”

“Can’t I just fake being at Orange then?” Kai pursed his mouth in a grimace. He didn’t like it, but that was the only solution.

“There are professional controls.” The princess shook her head. “Even if we bribe the examiner, there will be more checks on the mainland. I imagine you aren’t planning to hide here for the next ten years, right?”

“Yeah... I’m not doing that.” Kai scowled. He had been so close to solving this mess, and yet it escaped him. “Thank you for trying...”

“Wait!” Valela flushed, hand raised as if she expected him to run away. “I’m not giving up that easily. We can still find a way. It’ll just be more laborious.”

A knock on the glass door interrupted their conversation. The waiter carried three trays of refreshments on a single arm and efficiently set them on the table before disappearing.

Kai marveled at the rows of finely made snacks, tarts and pastries, all shaped to resemble flowers or leaves. To think someone spent so much effort on something that would be consumed.

*Well, they were made in seven minutes if the waiter was honest. The chef must have a yellow profession...*

“Please, try anything that catches your eye. I ordered them for you as well.” Valela bit on a pink lotus, her poker face back on. “As I was saying, there are other ways to obtain an ID, though they have some complications.”

“What kind?”

“Flynn must have told you I’ve sponsored promising individuals before.”

"He said he doesn't discuss his clients without their permission."

"Oh, that's..." Valela used a napkin to dab a crumb off her face.

"Surprising?" Kai chuckled. "Don't tell him but he's *surprisingly* serious and thoughtful when it matters. Most of the time."

"Mhmm... he's a curious individual. I don't hire incompetent staff," Valela said with a faint smile. "After what happened during the Vastaire's investigation, I realized I needed to have more influence without the governor and the council. Flynn has been helping me keep an eye out for talented natives and gather informants."

"That's quite the feat."

"It's what's necessary to make a difference in the archipelago," she muttered. "Uhm... I'll need to figure out an appropriate story for your new identity. Sponsoring you will allow me to fend off much of the scrutiny."

Kai raised an eyebrow. "You mean I'd work for you?"

"No, that's not it." Valela hurried to deny it with a flustered face. "I mean, maybe sometimes, if something important comes up like..."

"Supporting the archipelago and its inhabitants?"

*What's up with her? She was never this flustered when she was younger.*

"Yes!" The princess vehemently agreed. "You'd also get resources and funds to continue your education. Have you decided what you'll do on the mainland? There are so many cities, it's important to have a plan."

"Not exactly..."

"I can offer you my contacts to find an apprenticeship or an academy. Or open an Alchemy shop if that's more to your liking. The choice is completely up to you." She looked away at the city below. "This is the best way I can help, but I'll understand if you don't want to get tied up with me."

"I'll take your deal."

"You will?" Valela's head snapped back on him with a radiant smile. "I don't want you to feel pressured. I'll give you what help I can in either case."

"It's fine." Kai picked a tulip-shaped pastry that tasted like strawberries. Even if Hallowed Intuition hadn't vouched for her earlier, this was his best option by far. "Naturally, I'll have to read the details of the contract before I sign anything."

"Of course, it's nothing stringent. It's meant to connect people for the archipelago. I should have a copy somewhere..." She rummaged through the folds of her dress when the glass door opened.

Flynn marched inside with Hobbes huddled between his arms. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything. His Majesty demanded to be carried in."

"Meew!" The furball leaped on the table, sniffing the refreshments with mild interest.

Valela stared at the feline. "I thought they didn't allow animals inside the establishment. Whose cat is that?"

The instant she turned to Flynn, Hobbes blinked away. The only trace of his passage were three missing snacks and the smugness flowing through their bond.

*Such a troublemaker.*

Kai shared a single glance with Flynn before they spoke at the same time. "What cat?"

"This—" Her gaze froze on the empty table. "There was a silver cat right here." She bent to check under the table and stood up to scan the balcony, even leaning over the overgrown railing. "Where did it go?"

She paced the area twice before pointing an accusing finger at them. "You know what's going on. Don't lie."

"Okay." Flynn lifted his hands in surrender and nodded vehemently at Kai. "C'mon, tell her about your teleporting cat."

*Well, it's too late to pull back now.*

"Hobbes is my familiar. He blinked away while you were distracted."

"You're making fun of me." Valela crossed her arms, eyeing them unconvinced till the glutton furball came back for another round of snacks.

"Meow." Hobbes disappeared with two more tarts under the princess's disbelieving gaze.

"That's—"

"Weren't you telling me about the contract?" Kai tried to bring the conversation back on track. "How long will the ID take?"

“Oh, you’ve already agreed. Great! I’ll be representing my client in this negotiation then.” Flynn helped himself to the snacks on the table. “You never ordered half this much during our meetings,” he said with a full mouth.

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“That went pretty well. I told you she would agree.” Flynn grinned, leaving the upper city to head back to their house.

“It went okay.” Kai conceded. “I won’t celebrate till everything’s signed and done.”

The deal had been as simple as Valela promised, with few concrete obligations that could be fulfilled at his convenience. While he didn’t need any financial aid, the princess insisted he accepted not to leave flaws in his cover story. They still had to hammer out a few details about his new identity, and Valela told them she would get back to them in a few days.

*She did look quite confident. Though she always does...*

Flynn sighed audibly. “You’re always so paranoid. And why didn’t you pick Calvin? It was such a great name.” He pouted. “You could have just changed the surname.”

Kai threw him a dirty look. “Don’t think I forgot about what you did. Any of it.”

“Offered a fun way to break the ice? It worked out pretty well, didn’t it?”

“You left me there without an explanation. What if she didn’t recognize me?”

“But she did. You would have been forced to act naive if you knew. It was much better to unite you two against one evil and extremely charming villain.” Flynn smiled widely. “No need to thank me. I’m happy to sacrifice myself for the cause.”

Kai gritted his teeth and walked faster. “You just got lucky it worked out.” He wasn’t sure what he hated more: Flynn’s unbearable smugness or the fact he could see the logic in his arguments.

*Fine. I’ll shave only half his head and call it a day.*

“C’mon, there is no need to be envious of my genius.” Flynn ran to catch up with him. “But seriously, why did you choose Matthew Reece?”